

**STILL ROCKING AFTER ALL THESE YEARS:
ADAMASTOR WRITES BACK
AINDA ABANANDO O BARCO APÓS TODOS
ESTES ANOS:
ADAMASTOR ESCREVE DE VOLTA**

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This paper investigates the discursive construction of the mythical Adamastor in André Brink's *The First Life of Adamastor* (1993) vis-a-vis the one presented in its hypertext, *The Lusíads* by Luíz Vaz de Camões (1572). The latter celebrates the Portuguese colonialist enterprise and therefore it has been material in the construction of the Portuguese national identity. The identity built in a faraway past still prevails today, closely interconnected with notions of imperialist nostalgia. In his novel, Brink rewrites/recreates the figure of the giant as a South African native, providing the insight of the 'Other', at the same time that the binarism is problematically reversed for this time around it is the colonized who is the Subject. This reversal produces an intricate 'writing back' which is most significant in terms of gender and, in particular, in the controversial construction of the role of women in that process as the text could be argued to reinscribe paradigms of misogyny.

Keywords: Adamastor, *The First Life of Adamastor*, nationalism, ethnicity, gender.

Este artigo investiga a construção discursiva do mítico Adamastor em *The First Life of Adamastor* de André Brink (1993) face ao apresentado no seu hipertexto, *Os Lusíadas*, de Luíz Vaz de Camões (1572). Esta última obra celebra a iniciativa

colonialista portuguesa e, portanto, tem sido primordial na construção da identidade nacional lusa. A identidade construída num passado distante ainda prevalece hoje, estreitamente interligada a noções de nostalgia imperialista. No seu romance, Brink reescreve/recria a figura do gigante como um nativo Sul-africano, proporcionando assim a visão do 'outro', ao mesmo tempo que o binário é problemáticamente revertido já que desta vez é o colonizado que é o sujeito. Esta reversão produz um complexo 'escrever de volta' que é bastante significativo em termos de género e, em particular, na construção controversa do papel feminino no processo já que poderá argumentar-se que o texto reinscreve paradigmas de misoginia.

Palavras-chave: Adamastor, *The First Life of Adamastor*, nacionalismo, etnicidade, género.

All those generations who, each one of them, had to define in terms of his, her, own life a reaction to violence – reply to Africa – a redefinition of Adamastor. I, too, cannot avoid this. But in my choices I can neither deny my history nor merely become its victim. There is no new beginning, no clean break, no wiped slate. [...] I have still had to make my own choices.

André Brink, *An Act of Terror*, 826-827

Love, indeed. But what could be done about that? One does not live only through words, but through flesh as well.

André Brink, *The First Life of Adamastor*, 102.

[Italics in the text]

This text is not about Luís Vaz de Camões. This simple assertion already represents an affront to the 16th century Portuguese poet, especially when it involves *The Lusíads* (1572). Whenever Camões or his epic is in the room – in the text – they are always the focus of attention, always sticking the *padrão* marking the sovereignty over the literary territory in question. To deny them this status, carefully grown and groomed by numerous critics and nationalistic voices, is to incur in a serious offense. Similarly, when José Madeira publishes *Camões contra a expansão e o império*, he is

aware that his proposition, audaciously splashed in the title, will put him in the way of people's fury (Madeira, 2000, p. 8).

The thousands of pages written on *The Lusíads* over a period of more than four hundred years have systematically, obsessively even, constructed, reinforced and crystallized a conceptualization of national identity which only rarely is disputed. In fiction there have been António Quadros' *Quibíricas* (1972), Manuel da Silva Ramos' and João Alfacinha da Silva's *Os Lusíadas* (1977), António Lobo Antunes' *As Naus* (1988) and, more or less problematically, work by Fernando Pessoa and Manuel Alegre. It could be said though, that these works, as those of others, have limited success in interrogating national identity in most people's minds. Academically the topic has been effectively addressed by scholars such as Maria Calafate Ribeiro and Josiah Blackmoore but, again, popular imagination does not generally incorporate aspects of their discussions. Dispute also originates from other corners of the world. Not that they aim to investigate any notion of Portuguese national identity but because history, particularly during the period euphemistically referred to as the Discoveries, has given way to intercultural passageways. That is to say that Portugal and the Portuguese are not the sole "creators" of their symbolic meaning when the ex-centric write back (Hutcheon, 1988; Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 1989).

This reasoning is also especially insolent with respect to the figure of Adamastor insofar as it is regarded both as a pure Camonean invention (though it is well known it is based on a Greek Roman myth) and as the personification of all sorts of adversities the Portuguese navigators so bravely overcame, "a *demonic* composite of the natural and human foes faced by the Portuguese imperial enterprise" (Quint, 1989, p. 128. Italics added). To deconstruct the mythologization of the monstrous rock is consequently to begin to demythologize as well the magnitude of the Portuguese national identity discourse which has meaningfully failed since then to find appropriate (by which I mean as grand) substitutes to Adamastor. But if one sees beyond "the juggleries of erudition", one will be able to see another greatness in Camões, as João Madeira argues, a poet that not only celebrates the Portuguese feats but who also pays

homage to timeless human values (2000, p.10).

My approach to this intercultural crossing will be, in fact, in stressing the flow suggested by the word “crossing”. “Crossing” is used not in the sense one leaves a place and reaches the other, leaving the frontiers undisputed; I use it as a synonymy of “travelling across”, thus emphasizing the permanent aspect of the journey. I will also be using the word to evoke an “open channel”, a channel which allows the aforementioned current to travel in both directions. Portugal cannot speak for itself (or rather, it is not the only one speaking) and its Adamastors anymore when the Pygmalion complex is exposed; this “crossing” has enabled Adamastors to throw their voices back to the imperial centre all the way up from the South African cape. This essay is about a text materializing one of those voices.

Writing back is not however without its perils; a very active member of *Die Sestigers*, André Brink was deeply involved in using Afrikaans to speak against the apartheid regime. Apartheid abuse has, in fact, occupied a great part of his life work. However, critics have detected in his fiction contradictions they have identified as “a subconscious implication in the structures he so passionately critiques [apartheid]” (Diala, 2003, p. 903), even drawing dangerously close to racism (Chait, 2000, p. 18-20). Sue Kossew writes apropos of *The First Life of Adamastor* (originally published in 1993) that there is “a disturbing hint both of misogyny and of racial stereotyping that somehow undercuts the realigning of historical accounts which this rewriting of the legend seeks to perform” (1996, p. 56). In *The First Life* Brink proposes to explore two myths, the racial and the sexual ones (Interview, 1993, p. 23). However, the latter takes clear precedence over the race issue putting at risk Brink’s political intentions. As I shall demonstrate, the textual construction of gender and of the role of women can be quite problematic.

The premise behind *The First Life* is explicitly revealed by the author in his short but enlightening introduction; André Brink makes use of Camões’s mythological birth of Adamastor as one of the original Titans who provoked Zeus into war. Taking advantage of Adamastor’s mythic nature, Brink invites the reader to imagine a creature who can live succes-

sive lives and still watches over the Cape of Storms (2000, p. 13).¹ Though in Canto V of *The Lusíads* Adamastor is a story-teller too – of his unfortunate love affair with Thetis and a prophet of the Portuguese maritime disasters – in reality he is not speaking his own mind; Camões is speaking for him, ultimately serving the main purpose of the epic, to sing Portuguese feats and to establish that people as the boldest in the world, stubbornly engaging in war and mighty quests (1997, Canto V, stanza 41). In his novel, Brink makes of Adamastor the protagonist and only narrator, coming down, not unlike the Portuguese and Camões, from a distinguished lineage of warriors, adventurers and storytellers. This is truly his story and the point of view is redirected (it is a first person narration). This will be a story on South Africanness. This shift reflects Brink’s own purposes (mirroring precisely Camões whose racial bias he aims to denounce) as he is the voice in this introduction, supposedly passing the turn to Adamastor from then on.

Brink sees the representation of Adamastor as a bearded monster with yellow teeth as an unmistakable reflection of the “eurocentric revulsion” (2000, p. 6) towards black peoples, one, I might add, that exemplifies the use of the grotesque in colonial texts. Brink’s commitment to the liberation of Adamastor from imperial voices who define him is patent in his disposition against Portugueseness from the bad taste Brink sees in Manueline churches to the arresting objection he finds in Thetis’s rejection of Adamastor.² The reason behind it Brink identifies as a racist

¹ T’kama has a mythic nature as well; he is descendant of the great hunter Heitsi-Eibib and of Kanima (Ostrich Feather), the first man created by the Khoisan god Tsui-Goab. *The Lusíads* establishes a link between Adamastor and Polyphemus (1997: Canto V, stanzas 28 and 88) whereas *The First Life* does the same with Prometheus (2000, p. 132). These and other mythical connections have been frequently commented upon regarding Adamastor, namely Atlas and the Colossus of Rhodes; see Costa Ramalho (1980), Cidade (1968, pp. 148-149), Oliveira e Silva (1999, pp. 250-251), Figueiredo (2003, pp. 60-70), Madeira (2000, pp. 64-65) and Lipking (1996, pp. 214-215) among others. Less conventional connections have also been detected with Frankenstein and the Elephant Man (Monteiro, 1996, 130), the sphinx (Berardinelli, 2000, p. 80), Dorian Gray (Figueiredo, 2003, p. 68), the Medusa (Figueiredo, 2003, pp. 70-77), and Caliban (Oliveira e Silva, 1999, p. 247).

² The textual connection of André Brink with Portugal began as early as 1970 when he wrote

motivation of the author of *The Lusíads*:

I must protest. My own suspicion, the product no doubt of a more cynical and secular age, is that if the lack of response to the poor creature's amorous advances had indeed been partly caused by a discrepancy in size, this may well have involved only one part of his anatomy. (2000, p. 3)

"On this," he continues, "perhaps with the best intentions, Camoens seizes, taking *pars pro toto*, blowing up, in a manner of speaking, out of all proportion a stumbling-block which might well have been overcome with more patience and considerable pleasure" (2000, p. 3. Italics in the text). The sarcasm in this sentence ("with the best intentions") is cleverly combined with a metaphorical discourse aiming to depreciate Camões, in the end just a white European whose fear of the black phallus ("stumbling-block") is such he does not even dare trying to *handle*. Brink not only rightly identifies an underlying sexual component in the reading of *The Lusíads* which is linked to ethnic issues, one that has been by and large ignored / repressed, but he also puts Camões, the poet who is said to have single-handedly *written* Portugal's national identity (invented Portugal, says Figueiredo, 2003, p. 71), in the position of being subdued by that powerful sexuality. Brink is therefore fictionalizing what Stephen Gray as pointed out Adamastor to represent: "the *white man's* anxieties about Africa" (1979, p. 37. Italics added). In the book's introduction then, Camões is identified with the white woman who Adamastor kidnaps with a view to a rape in *The First Life*. Either in a homosexual context or metamorphosing into a woman (metamorphosis being the key to Camões's Adamastor episode), Brink suggests that if only Camões had been brave and patient enough, he would have learned to enjoy the black phallus. Meaningfully, with a few patriotic exceptions, in *The Lusíads* women are compulsively absent and silent (I am not thinking of female figures be-

Fado: 'reis deur Noord-Portugal. Like several of Brink's texts, including the *First Life*, it is originally written in Afrikaans. Over the years Brink has translated several of those into English but not that voyage in the North of Portugal.

longing to the mythological plane) and Brink, in his turn, appears to pick up the violence committed against them and replicate it in his text. In this respect, Brink presents the same attitude towards women as records of colonial history and literary texts. But I will come back to this topic later; firstly, it is necessary to look into the carefully orchestrated use of metamorphosis (a specific materialization of the broader strategy of doubleness) in Camões's hypertext and in Brink's *First Life*.

In the story of Adamastor according to Camões, the character is a fallen Titan who, being on the losing party in the war of that *race* (as the titans were referred to in classical terminology) against the gods, was punished by being turned into the rocky South African cape. His suffering is further accentuated by falling in love and subsequently being rejected by the water nymph Thetis who is terrified by the sheer magnitude of his body. With the connivance of her mother, Doris, and intending to distract Adamastor from battle, Thetis leads the monstrous giant to believe in her love. She appears to him naked on the beach where he, unable to resist her, tries to kiss and hold her fair body. Alas she was deceiving him and the encounter turns into tragedy: first her, then him, transform themselves into rocks:

But, oh, what words for my chagrin!
Convinced my beloved was in my arms,
I found myself hugging a hillside
Of undergrowth and rough bush;
I was cheek to cheek with a boulder
I had seized as her angelic face,
Unmanned utterly, dumb and numb with shock,
A rock on an escarpment, kissing rock! (1997, Canto V, stanza 56)

This appears to me the key stanza for Brink's rewriting of the tale of Adamastor. The sexual metaphors are unmistakable: the embrace for the sexual act; the turf for the female's pubic hair (the original 'mato' still being used in Portuguese for that intent and a close equivalent to the col-

loquial use of ‘bush’ in English), in this case harsh and thick³ to represent the nymph’s unwillingness to receive him in her body; and his metamorphosis into a rock, rock (and, more to the point, a cape) synecdochically standing for his phallus. But notice that as he *hardens* from soft tissue to rock solid (simultaneously because of his desire and as a punishment for that forbidden desire), he undergoes a psycho-castration; he loses his humanness as well as his manliness (“Unmanned utterly”). In Brink’s postcolonial tale, the author wishes to explore both these elements, that is, how T’kama, the South African figure upon which the legend of the monstrous Adamastor will be built, is deprived of his humanness, which is suggested by Camões in the giant’s muteness and paralysis, upon the arrival of the white Portuguese and also, though problematically, how that is achieved due to the betrayal of a woman, herself white too. In the end, her metamorphosis is proven unreal, thus humiliating Adamastor as he tries to embrace her.

To escape Western historic rationalism towards an African sense of time, T’kama does not situate specifically when the white beard-men arrived to the cape; after all, “it hardly matters what history records” (2000, p. 23). They got there in a big floating bird which appeared to lay eggs in the water. These strange beings emerged from inside these eggs, covered in bright colours in what gave the impression to be feathers. T’kama is the native people’s *chu’que*, their leader, whose decisions regarding the attitudes to have during this encounter (in the sense of the discoverers’ actual arrival and the events that will follow) seal the fate of that people. His name, T’kama, means Big Bird in *khoi*, the language of the *khoikhoin*, meaning ‘people of people’, later renamed Hottentots.⁴ The encounter

³ In William C. Atkinson’s translation “a rocky cliff bristling with thickets” (1952, p. 132).

⁴ As David Quint has noted, the episode of Adamastor should be read against the one immediately preceding it, that of Fernão Veloso (1989: 128). It is especially important to keep that in mind when reading *The First Life* because the Veloso episode is a humorous description of the encounter of the Portuguese with the Hottentots where the former chase the natives into the forest. Similarly, T’kama’s people are forced to leave their coast onto the interior territories. The Hottentot in *The Lusiads*, which could well be T’kama, is described as more savage than Polyphemus (1997: Canto V, stanza 28). Describing the Hottentots in general, Vasco da Gama refers to “this people’s bad faith/ And brutish lack of courtesies”

is at first a non-encounter: they are unable to recognize the floating bird as a ship and the eggs as the small boats used to get to shore. Moreover, the *khoikhoin* cannot initially see these flamboyant birds hatched from the eggs as humans. A witness to the birth of the Portuguese, T’kama doubtfully muses: “Well, people. We’d seen all kinds of human beings before. People like us” (2000, p. 12). Those are not people like them. The *khoikhoin* retreat into the forest, not knowing what to make of the new arrivals, of the ship, boats and the birdmen/beard-men and of any of their animality. Watching them from afar, the locals carefully consider their humanness because they identify familiar patterns of behavior: hunting for food, fetching water, washing their clothes which they come to realize are not feathers (2000, p. 12). In sum, the “sort of thing we had been doing all our lives. So they seemed like ordinary human beings after all” (2000, p. 16). But still they are unsure; the strangers only *seemed*. They are finally convinced when the Portuguese stick their *padrão* in the sacred ground of the great hunter Heitsi-Eibib. Initially they fear the birdmen will desecrate the holy place but later they see the *padrão* as a homage to their hero (notice the sexual undertone): “There was the living proof of blessings to come: their great cross [the cross of Aviz] planted in our cairn” (2000, p. 17). Their apprehension was, of course, justified. Brink constructs the *khoikhoin* as naïve but instinctively right. The cross and the weight of its representation will come to crush the African peoples. However, by doing so, Brink also reinforces the noble savage stereotype as well as that of the black peoples “purer”, “nobler” nature, closer to an idyllic state which is part of the concept “primitive”. Nevertheless at points, the *khoikhoin* are assaulted with doubt. T’kama in particular questions the humanness of the Portuguese, as later he will question their humanity. The matter of their apparent absence of a language, a marker of humanness, worries him (2000, p. 18). In fact, if anything, the sounds they make

(1997: Canto V, stanza 34). In this instance, William C. Atkinson’s otherwise looser translation is closer to the racially-biased description in the original: “ugly malice and savage designs of these brutes” (1952, p. 128). Notice that the word ‘Hottentot’ itself has now been recognized to have negative racial implications and therefore is not accepted in academic and scientific discourses.

recall the chattering of birds (2000, p. 18) so T'kama sings bird mating songs to attract the woman's attention (2000, p. 31). Likewise, T'kama is only convinced the white woman is human when he sees her for the second time (2000, p. 30). The second coming of the woman to shore establishes the positive identification of T'kama as Adamastor and as author of his (and her) tale:

As I stood there watching from the rocks (almost washed away myself by the new tide to which I paid scant attention), as I sit here hauling in that dancing boat from wave to wave, from line to line, tugging, scribbling, she was brought back, back to the copper beach where the sea spat her out. (2000, p. 29)

The change in viewpoint in relation to *The Lusiads's* extract above while maintaining the imperial binary logic is revealing; the Us versus Other fallacy is used against itself. It is the same discourse built upon the same premises, that is, the Other (now the white European) is dehumanized and deprived of speech. On the other side of the looking-glass the image is the same but nevertheless it is a world in reverse, the ineffaceable sense of that reversion utterly annulling and contrasting with the unawares illusion of the original object/thought. The binary technique is however abandoned by the eventual heartfelt acceptance of a white humanness, in the end demonstrating that the local peoples' could accommodate forms of humanness different from their own whereas the Europeans, overcome by their humanist self-importance, could not envision a black humanness. This shortcoming culminated historically in the Black Atlantic slave trade.

The use of metamorphosis when transferred to *The First Life* follows suit as far as the principle of doubleness goes. Metamorphosis *per se* depends, logically, from the idea of duality. Camões, however, doubles doubleness by presenting two simultaneous metamorphoses, a type of metamorphosis into sameness so as to stress the difference between the parties: Thetis and Adamastor are transformed into rocks (or so she pretends) but while for her it is voluntary and conducive to liberty, for him it is unwilling and a sentence to eternal imprisonment into immobility (Thetis'

metamorphosis is, in the end, just an illusion she created to distract and humiliate Adamastor). Brink brings light to this process in Camões' text by appropriating the device: T'kama signifies big bird and the Portuguese are characterized as birdmen. Though in *The Lusíads* Thetis' metamorphosis is not followed up, in *The First Life* the bird qualities on both sides are repeatedly used and extended so that one can actually speak of an allegory. This allegory starts to be built from the opening of the novel in T'kama's description:

From the sea, from the nesting-place of the sun, we could see two objects swimming towards us, looking for all the world like two enormous sea-birds with white feathers fluttering in a breeze [...]. Not far from the beach [...] the two birds came to rest and appeared to draw in their feathers. [...] While we were still standing there staring, the two birds in front began to lay eggs of a curious roundish shape, brown in colour. [...] What amazed us was that these eggs did not emerge, as one would expect, from the tail-end of the birds, but rather from under their wings; and soon the eggs came drifting towards us on the tide. They had hardly reached the shore when people started hatching from them, not one at a time, but whole bunches. (2000, pp. 11-12)

The foreigners are therefore birds, "birds you might say, all colours under the sun. We first thought it was feathers but then we made out it was a kind of clothing. And strutting about stiff-legged like ostriches" (2000, p. 12). The beards and the overgrown moustaches complete the look of these pompous 'birds'. The *khoikhoi*n however are also defined along the lines of the class of birds. According to their cosmogony the first man was Ostrich Feather, for instance (notice the orthographic and phonetic closeness to 'Father'). Given that this story is told from the part of the (pre-) colonized, it constructs a world and whoever arrives at it in the lines of the local mythologies; there are numerous literal and symbolic flights of birds into the text (2000, pp. 43, 44, 45, 48, 72, 73, 78, 81, 93, 132) but more importantly, it is structural in grasping the universe: people and the ships as birds, sun as nest, the penis as an ostrich. As previously mentioned, T'kama means literally Big-Bird or *ostrich* (2000, p. 14),

which in his native language had acquired a sexual connotation to refer to the penis. It is described as a “wild bird-thing” (2000, p. 59) and frequently simply as a bird (2000, pp. 67, 68, 84, 103, 106, 110, 112). The text saturates T’kama with sexual attributes which go beyond the anatomic reference; the character is phallicized, defined by his sexual dexterity (2000, pp. 14, 30) or by his later inability to perform. These two moments are determined by the introduction of the white woman in the story. Before T’kama hints with false modesty to why he deserves the name, even flirting with the female reader: “so I humbly trust, as I am not given to self-advertisement, that the reader will draw his (or indeed her) own conclusions” (2000, p. 14). It is a family attribute as his own father could never put his “bird” to rest (2000, p. 15). When the white woman is “hatched” on the beach he feels overwhelmed by her (2000, pp. 23, 25). To prove he means no harm, he shows her his penis. The Western reader is tempted to read the episode as a cultural misunderstanding (an instance of cultural untranslatability) but in fact T’kama is not surprised with her terror; he knew his penis could be scary (2000, p. 28). This is, therefore, the exhibition of a peacock. We gather then that T’kama is an undependable narrator insofar as he embodies a specific male black type whose viewpoint is not extended to every member of his community, especially as far as women are concerned.⁵ His interaction with the woman he craves is highly aggressive and totally dismissing of her as a human being. As he laid his eyes on her he knew his penis was made for her vagina (2000, p. 28). She has absolutely no saying in the process and if she is frightened by his big penis, she will learn how to enjoy it (like Camões) if she is patient (2000, p. 28). The second time around T’kama commits sacrilege, takes

⁵ There are further examples of the postmodern technique of unreliable narration for instance when T’kama cannot identify the navigators; they could be Bartolomeu Dias or Vasco da Gama’s men, or indeed others that came subsequently (2000, p. 13). In other instances he refers to the inherent unreliable nature of historic memory: “Looking back across five centuries it is hard to recall one particular morning, and I cannot guarantee that it was then like I’m telling it now” (2000, p. 43); “In that year, if that was the year – the year Da Gama discovered the sea route round the Cape of Storms” (2000, p. 69); and when trying to recall the language he spoke with the woman he adds a note: “Portuguese? For the life of me I can’t remember” (2000, p. 87).

back the offerings made to Heitsi-Eibib to give them to the woman and approaches her while she bathes. Again she reacts in shock and he hits her because, after all, he knew what the “remedy” was for a “woman in that state” (2000, pp. 31-32). Not knowing her, it is evident that the male narrator has the belief that he knows what is best for any woman, all women in fact. And that is the privilege of his sexual attention. His ego is unable to register he is being rejected, though for imperialistically created patterns of beauty, sexuality and morals. Because she is ‘only’ the object of desire, T’kama wishes to negotiate her with the white men whose relation to this woman is never known. Her desirability is men’s business. Himself a tribe leader, T’kama wants to show his respect for the other people’s (men’s) honor and to offer a bride-price. Unfortunately, as they do not possess the power of speech (2000, pp. 18, 31) he has to communicate with them (not with her) by demonstrating his intentions. To that purpose he shows the Portuguese his erection over the woman’s naked body. He is predictably met with their bullets.

Having failed to *conquer* the woman on the best terms (by ‘best terms’ we mean a negotiation with other males), T’kama takes her by force.⁶ His reasons indicate primarily a need to possess rather than an interracial attraction: “I want her. [...] I must have her” (2000, p. 35), “You’re mine now” (2000, p. 41), “She is mine. [...] It is my woman” (2000, p. 49). Evoking the arrogance and irresponsibility of Paris when he takes Helen, T’kama initiates a war with this kidnapping. The consequences will be devastating for his people who are massacred and starve but he remains inflexible. She is his, and as such he names her; being nothing else but a

⁶ In this respect I have to disagree with critics who disregard the abuse reinterpreting it as a love affair resisting the disapproval of the communities of both parties (Sandra Chait) or even more puzzlingly as Luc Renders who seems to believe T’kama abducted the woman “by accident” (2000); eventually, argues Renders, they “develop a mutual understanding which blossoms into love” (2000). My position is akin to Lipking’s; he maintains that only “an unsympathetic listener might find comedy [or love] in the tale of a giant who pursues a beautiful young nymph and tries to win her by force” (1996, p. 218) whereas Kossew provocatively posits that T’kama’s disability is either threatening or amusing depending on the gender of the reader (1996, p. 56). Mario Vargas Llosa stresses the humorous aspect while dismissing the feminine controversy as irrelevant (1993).

woman, that is how she is called, *khois*, in the process therefore losing her individuality. She is now part of the world he has the authority to bring into existence and over which he rules:

I accept my land, I sing *my land*, in *my tongue* and throat I give it sound, *I name it*. I say: wood, and turn to wood. I say, mountain, hill, rock, river, sea, and become each of them in turn. [...]. I say creature, I say man, *I say woman*. [...] I fill the day with names, *I inscribe* the plains like *a sheet of paper*, [...] I say everything which is still to happen and everything no one has ever thought up, I say a terrible I and a fearsome you, and in the sound of my own shout I walk into the day that breaks open before me like an egg from which impossible new words are hatched. (2000, p. 45. Italics added)

In this originally much longer passage⁷, one sees a hybrid T’kama manifesting his power. At the same time that his being cannot be extricated from the natural world around him and from the mythologies which define him, he proclaims his right to possess it because he is its creator. Moreover, he conquers it via the spoken word whilst anticipating the power of the *written word* (“I inscribe the plains like a sheet of paper”), in the manner of the anthropocentrically ‘illuminated’ conquerors (recall he is scribbling as he watches the woman come to shore). As such, T’kama uses the same method of mapping (2000, p. 53) and renaming which displays their colonialist impulse. The Portuguese even rename what they had already stripped of their native name: from Cape of Storms to Cape of Good Hope, in both having as a referent the imperial self as Bartolomeu Dias’s achievement could hardly be said to represent good hope for the African peoples. As part of the ex(a)propriation process, the Portuguese also claimed ownership over the land they ‘found’, ignoring the people to whom it already ‘belonged’, by sticking it with their penis-like *padrão*, and the same is done by T’kama⁸: “This rearing mamba in

⁷ Notice the reference to Adamastor’s metamorphosis.

⁸ Oliveira e Silva posits that in *The Lusiads* blacks are conveyed as absence (which invites very interesting Lacanian readings concerning “lack”) and therefore the cultural chaos of the “black man” justifies the imperial endeavour whose mission is to replace it with Order (1999,

my loins – erect like the tall cross now planted in Heitsi-Eibib’s sacred cairn – would not know any peace again before it had come to rest deep in the *kloof* [ravine] made for it” (2000, p. 28). Therefore he feels entitled to rename her – the way he had seen the beard-men do too before having sex with the native women they took (2000, p. 48) – and take her body (that is, displacing her geographically and forcing her into sexual intercourse).

The woman is therefore before impending rape in a context where for both white and black men there is no such concept. T’kama insists that the consummation follows the tribe’s rituals. To that effect, he covers his body in flowers and ties his penis to the biggest ostrich feather he could find. Besides the immediate phallic symbolism, the connection with the first human, Ostrich Feather, should not go unnoticed. Like Adam, it is up to him to populate the earth [and name things! *cf.* quotation, the “impossible egg” when he refers to naming], thus emphasizing the breeding responsibility of ‘man’ even over anyone else’s right to sexual autonomy. But besides his people’s ritualistic attire, T’kama is also using a hat he has taken from one of the Portuguese after the battle on the beach, confirming the transformation of this colonized / colonizer hybrid. He hopes to put on a bird-look, resembling that of her people. But the preparation is in reality a celebration of his irrepressible masculinity:

You should have seen that feather quivering with every step I took. [...] What woman could refuse a man like that? Look at the birds, [...] it is always the male that is most brightly plumed.

Behold the man: here I come. (2000, pp. 50-51)

The stealing of the hat after T’kama had forbidden his people to take any of the Europeans’ belongings for fear of their magical effect (like he had seen happening with the burning water given as a gift, probably

p. 248). Because of their “absence”, the black natives are fused with nature, entangled into historic invisibility (1999, p. 249). In a similar vein, Quint claims that the epic dehumanizes foreign and subject peoples, asserting the imperial victory as a symbol of the triumph of culture over nature (1989, p. 132).

aguardente), the sacrilege of taking Heitsi-Eibib's gift to impress the white woman (mirroring the sacrilege the Portuguese committed) and the non-compliance with the proper procedures regarding the woman's 'acquisition', will have a negative effect on what T'kama holds most dear. His penis fails him and he will not come, as the double entendre predicted. To that, has also contributed the woman who, having been denied humanness, speech ("the woman could not speak", 2000, p. 48)⁹, and bodily integrity has only two weapons: silence and laughter. It is precisely laughter she uses and with it 'castrates' T'kama. The non-event is catastrophic. The fate of the tribe changes and they are forced to begin a long and deadly voyage into the desert land. The woman is blamed as she is not *khoikhoin*; she "was carrying disaster with her", realizes T'kama (2000, p. 72), still firm in his resolution despite Khamab's pleas that they should not "wittingly carry death with [them]" (2000, p. 72). She roams like Pandora amongst them, causing the revenge of the land in magical and tremendous proportion. The tribe sustains floods, extreme heat and cold, attacks by wild animals on them and their cattle, disease, myriad deaths of children, women and warriors, and finally the haunting of the People of the Shadows, the spirit of the dead. Such are the consequences of a woman not being penetrated and inseminated; "all we need", argues Khamab, "is for you to succeed with the woman. [...] Then the tribe can prosper again" (2000, p. 84). Problematically, while displacing the native peoples,

⁹ The treatment of language as a political tool in *The First Life* exemplifies the contradiction critics find in Brink's work. It is beyond any question that Brink was profoundly committed to the anti-apartheidist cause which is evident from his fiction, his collection of political and literary essays, *Mapmakers: Writing in a State of Siege* (1983) and his autobiography, *A Fork in the Road* (2009). White writing – writing by white South Africans – served to fight the apartheid discourse, its terminology and ideologies, while asserting a right to an English or Afrikaans South Africanness and raising awareness among the white audience to the injustice of the political system. To that effect Brink has resorted to the voice of the black person in his writing, though the narrative appropriation raises issues regarding authorship and authority. For further discussion on this topic see Kossew, 1-31. It is intriguing then, also considering the very purposes he sets out to achieve with this short novel, that he denies the female character a voice. Ironically, he has quoted Wittgenstein to illustrate his understanding of the politics of language: "The limits of my language, are the limits of my world" (Wood, 1999, p. 117). As I demonstrate, language becomes a problem which limits his novel.

the text also displaces the blame onto the female figure. What in reality are in display are the diasporic consequences of colonialism which turned the people into refugees in their own nation. They were escaping the Portuguese fire power, they were dying of new forms of disease brought by the white people, they were roaming the territory unprepared. In an effort to avoid the historic perspective – so as to repudiate Western rationalism – the author finds a scapegoat, the woman, to explain the Afro-diasporic body. Brink's re-creation of women's role in his literary representation of the imperialist experience thus raises serious concerns regarding misogynist views.

Regarding the effect of T'kama's psycho-castration – reinterpreted as its opposite, gigantism – , the author resorts to the carnivalesque-grotesque, to both laughter and tragedy. The longer it passes without performing his duty to his manhood and to the tribe, the bigger his penis gets:

But succeed I didn't. No matter how wiry and thin I had become from all our wanderings and suffering, that bird in my loins continued to grow. For a while I kept it tied to my knee with a leather thong to keep it from swinging and slapping about; then to my calf; but still it went on growing, until I was getting worried it would get trampled underfoot or trip me up while walking. So I made a loop and tied the end to my waist with a *riem* [thong]. Bigger than the cobra that had attacked Khusab. And all for nothing; a useless – in fact obnoxious – appendage. (2000, p. 84. Italics in the text)

The element not only has a Rabelaisian quality, it is very literally Rabelaisian, though Brink, from his introduction, appears strangely oblivious to this fact and is only aware the name 'Adamastor' appears in a list of giants in *Pantagruel* (2000, p. 1). In the Second Book of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* François Rabelais describes how after the blood of Abel had soaked the earth, it became exceedingly fertile. That year nature was generous, particularly in producing medlars which everyone ate heartily. However, people suffered some strange side effects regarding proportion. Some men undergo a peculiar transformation:

some other *puffes* [penises] did swell in length by the member, which they call the Labourer of nature, in such sort that it grew marvellous long, fat great, lustie, stirring and Crest-risen, in the Antick fashion, so that they made use of it as of a girdle, winding it five or six times around the waste: but if it happened the foresaid member to be in good case, spooming with a full saile, bunt faire before the winde, then to have seen those strouting Champions, you would have taken then for men that had their lances settled on their Rest, to run at the ring. (1994, p. 170. Italics in the text)

Not only is *Pantagruel* one of the sources of Adamastor but it is also interesting to notice that in Rabelais there is a nautical allusion.¹⁰ But if Rabelais believes women are disappointed the race of men with such extraordinary appendages is extinct, the same is not felt by the white woman. As it grows increasingly bigger, T'kama's penis becomes dangerous to live with. When it is big enough to be wound twice around the waist, it hits him "like a lethal club between the eyes" whenever it becomes hard (2000, p. 88). The repeated attempts to have sex with the woman result in making the penis bigger so that it becomes a hazardous element for him and others. Eventually he has to wrap it four or five times around the waist (2000, p. 102). The woman is, understandably, afraid of him. Daily it would smash their belongings in the hut and endanger her life. The hyper-sexualization he invested himself with before the woman's arrival, which made "giggling girls [...] stretch [...] the inner lips of their entrances to form lobes as long and red as the gills of a wild cock", is materialized and shown to be lethal after all (2000, p. 33).¹¹ Male sexual hard line thrust is initially used as a self-glorifying activity but gradually it has to be read as damaging and potentially lethal, especially for women who are the targets of that impetus. The exaggeration put forth in the scene is

¹⁰ *Pantagruel* is not strictly speaking the birthplace of Adamastor, contrarily to Brink's belief. Adamastor's birth, at least as a word, goes back to the classics, to Claudianus Pelorus's *Gigantomachia* (4th century), Sidonius Apollinaris's *Gai Sollii Apollinaris Sidonii Epistulae et Carmina* (5th century) and Ravisius Textor's *Officina* (16th century). See Rodrigues (1979, pp. 59-60) and Moniz, Moniz and Paz (2001, p. 13).

¹¹ Notice the sexual innuendo of the term 'cock'.

invested with ridicule though not to the point that it invalidates misogynistic concerns before the woman's manifest despair. We thus come to André Brink's point; Thetis is afraid of Adamastor's *specific* gigantic proportion not, as *The Lusiads* portray, of *a* giant. What Brink seems oblivious to is that *any woman* would be afraid of being penetrated and ripped by a gigantic penis (as indeed a nymph would be, Figueiredo, 2003, p. 66). And being ripped is precisely the psychological and somatic effect of a rape which also has a place in his novel not only eventually by T'kama but also by the Xhosa witch-doctor with the excuse, of all possible excuses, that it is to cure T'kama of his incapacitating sexual condition. But raped she must be because the land is angry at her being untouched.

The point of matter is that while T'kama does not have intercourse with the woman, he will remain deformed and his people on the brink of death. The chain of events is reversed when T'kama, who had stubbornly kept the white woman with his people (victims like the Trojans when Helen is within the city walls) despite their recurring pleas, puts their well-being before his own.¹² A long way and time into their voyage, the *khoikhoin* find a river where to kill their thirst. They are attacked by a crocodile and T'kama, for the first time since the woman made her appearance in their lives, reacts by seeing to their safety as is his responsibility as a leader. Not only that but he also saves the woman with his penis, which she grabs to pull herself to land. But the crocodile catches the fleshy limb, turning the river red as described in the Exodus, where the Ur-diaspora is described. T'kama's second castration is therefore a shift

¹² According to Greek mythology, Leda is raped by Zeus in the form of a bird, a swan. The result of it is none other but Helen who hatches from an egg. The recurrent use of western mythologies and canonical texts combined with African folklore contribute, in my view, to the richness and tightness of the novel. The reader feels they work complementarily. With the buffalo story (2000, pp. 62-66) Brink introduces African oral folklore while with T'kama's tortoises tale (2000, pp. 95-96) the author resorts to an important ethnographic animal. These are yet other tales involving women's kidnap and rape. Of the female tortoise which tried to escape the male T'kama recognizes her efforts are useless for there was "no way out for her" (2000, p. 95). This literary practice is characteristically postmodern. For more on André Brink's use of postmodern fiction see the introduction to *Pen and Power: A Post-Colonial Reading of J. M. Coetzee and André Brink* (Kosew, 1996, pp. 1-31).

from gigantism to nothingness, but this time around prompted by a sense of self-sacrifice for his people as well as the woman, not for his primal sexual urges. It is therefore, unlike the previous castration, a new beginning, as the birth imagery of the hut he wakes up in suggests (2000, p. 111). But he has lost “the greater part of [his] body” (2000, p. 111), that is, because his penis was bigger than the rest of his anatomy and also because it is the centre of male identity. This is the part of the novel that cannot do without the feminist approach. According to the *khoikhoi* foundational myth of the first man created by the god Tsui-Goab, woman was given to him (hence also T’kama’s certainty that the god had given the white woman to him) to be cured of the “gaping “wound” between her legs (2000, p. 85). So since his debilitating misadventure began T’kama was worried about “his” woman’s wound which his phallus could not heal. But now T’kama has a wound like hers and has been womanized (2000, p. 112). It is in fact a return to the origins but also a move forward for, as old Khamab reminds him, it is not everyman who has the opportunity to choose his future (2000, p. 112); new beginnings, clean breaks, wiped slates seem possible after all. Moreover, as humans were created out of stone, so T’kama’s new penis is made out of clay.¹³ It puts however, an end to T’kama’s fleeting feminine state. It is nevertheless of crucial importance to notice that the penis is casted to fit the woman’s vagina. His anatomy and hence his sexuality aim to complete hers. In one of the very few times the woman speaks, she tells him: “There’s only the two of us, T’kama. It’s up to us” (2000, p. 115). They are Ostrich Feather and Haunamaos, Adam and Eve¹⁴; the myth of origins is renewed through them. Hence that we have no description of the pair’s first sexual encoun-

¹³ When the woman steps on a praying mantis, considered a sacred animal by the tribe, they decide to leave her behind. Thus rejected a second time by the people she lives with and devastated for the harsh punishment for a fault she did not know she was committing, it is said “she would like to return to stone, growing back into the earth” (2000, p. 74).

¹⁴ The two tortoises whose tragic tale serves to illustrate how the female cannot escape her “natural” destiny are made into soup but to everyone’s amazement at the bottom of the pot they do not find the shells but two stones. Throughout the text Brink purposefully renews and rewrites the same pattern.

ter but an eroticized passage on rain fertilizing the earth and the incredible ability of nature to renew itself:

The rain that rained: every crack and crevice in the parched earth overflowed with wetness, and from deep tunnels emerged snakes and *meerkats*. Where there had been only death, new life broke out, dry beds of marshes were squelched with moisture, every hollow filled up heavily with water. [...] A flood washing away all that had been, cleansing utterly what remained, glistening with wetness and birth, until a new sun broke through to bellow over all that lives. *I am!* (2000, p. 116-117. Italics in the text)

No mention is made of the woman “*being!*” because it is T’kama who names and owns the land (it comes to mind that Camões’s Adamastor named himself as well; that is unambiguous in the Portuguese version, “Chamei-me Adamastor”, but unclear in Atkinson’s translation which reads “I am called Adamastor”. See Canto V, stanza 51). Nonetheless, it is the archaic connection with a woman’s body and the land which offers the final element of interpretation; she is raped like the African continent by European imperialism. Towards the end that is made explicit when a new cycle of explorers arrive and T’kama realizes their “shore was exposed and open, like a woman already taken” (2000, p. 120), echoing his own words at the time of the first encounter with the Europeans (2000, p. 44). Aptly Oliveira e Silva has also written that Africa is presented in *The Lusiads* as a political, human and culturally empty continent, *res nullius*, open to colonization (1999, p. 252). Brink aims to dispute the idea but only as far as the male presence is concerned since women in his novel hold insufficient credence.

During the process of rebuilding the penis, T’kama sees in her face that she has resigned to the inevitability of circumstances and did not care any more about what could happen to her (2000, p. 113). If T’kama could put himself in her shoes, he would have felt her experience: she was abandoned by her own people, she was taken against her will, she lived in terror of immediate rape, the *khoikhoi*’s diaspora had been hers too, she had been on the verge of death and had to endure with their outspoken hate. All that he knows but he still cannot understand her fear. The panic

he is invaded with as consummation draws near he sees in her too, though one cannot be sure whether it is a projection. Terrified with the prospect of failing and traumatized by his castration, T'kama asks the woman, whom he intended to rape, to help him carry out his plan (2000, p. 114). As before, when she literally handled his penis to relieve the tension, she resigns. No amount of patience can ever lead to pleasure. Accordingly Sue Kossew has said: "By couching their unfulfilled sexual encounter in natural terms (the snake and the ravine), Brink seems to be validating precisely that colonial stereotyping of the rampaging black man which his text seeks to undermine, while simultaneously turning the woman into an object without agency" (1996, p. 57). Adamastor's cruel requests that the woman participates in her own degradation are not actual requests for the woman has, in fact, no room for choice.

The main focus of the protagonist's action is throughout the text the colonization of the white woman's body and not only through sex. From an early moment he strives to "tame" the woman (2000, p. 47) and gradually she is made to look like a *khoi* woman (2000, pp. 50, 74).¹⁵ But despite all efforts, she escapes several times. What T'kama has no doubt about, her inability to speak, is in reality the last form of control she can still exert. Most of the time she ignores him, either out of being in a state of shock (2000, pp. 41-42) or as a form of silent resistance. As T'kama himself writes: once he made an effort to understand her "before returning (*characteristically*) to a preoccupation with himself" (2000, p. 122. *Italics added*). It is extremely ironic then that he speaks of choice and of *his* inability to free himself from *her*, immediately following her abduction. "We", he said, had passed that moment when choice was possible (2000, p. 44).

As he puts it, inside her lives "a pool of silence" but that can hardly be akin to human emptiness, one gathers (2000, p. 122). Only once do her words interrupt the male (narrator's) voice, proffered with an intensity which is magnified precisely because it happens only that time, expressing

¹⁵ The name Adamastor in its turn is probably a corrupted form from the Greek meaning "the untamed one" (Brink, 2000, p. 1 and Quint, 1989, p. 128).

the *angst* of the white woman displaced by European colonialism. It is when T’kama finds her after she had run off following the killing of a rabbit, the messenger of death in *khoi* tradition:

‘Don’t you understand? I couldn’t bear it any longer. I can’t do anything right. I understand nothing about you or your people or this god-damned country. There’s nowhere I can go to. My own people abandoned me a long time ago. Everything is impossible. I have nothing left, no possessions, no future, no hope, no faith, not even clothes. What am I doing here?’

Behind her: the earth falling away into the abyss. [...]

‘I wanted to die,’ she said. [...] Please won’t *you* kill me, T’kama?’

‘I’ve come for you. You must live with me.’ [he replied] (2000, pp. 99-100. Italics in the text)

Despite the years the woman spends among the *khoikhoin*, the communication between and T’kama will always remain poor both in linguistic and human terms. As she well knows, there is no use in crying tears or words out. She stays with T’kama simply because dying is impossible. T’kama is indisputably the sole producer of meaning. At the end, when Europeans come back, T’kama still believes that negotiating the woman’s value with the white men will guarantee the right course of events (when the Portuguese first arrived, T’kama was shocked not that his men sold the women of their tribe but that they were given away). Even after years of being together, he does not accept that femininity and feminine sexuality exist autonomously. Regardless of his constant verbal affirmation of possession over her, she will escape appropriation through aloofness and silence. It is unclear whether she leaves voluntarily or is taken back (kidnapped a second time) by the white newcomers. Cyril Coetzee, for instance, in the painting *T’kama Adamastor* (1999) inspired in Brink’s novel, seems to favor the version given to T’kama to ease his pain.¹⁶ Considering the woman’s consistent behaviour and even T’kama’s open fears, it seems more likely the woman just left him behind. This interpretation is also in

¹⁶ Curiously, T’kama himself asks us in the novel, “can one trust a painting?” (2000, p. 13).

accordance with Thetis's 'betrayal' in *The Lusiads* and is the only that makes sense given Brink's political motivations, to show the betrayal of *all whites* (see title of chapter XXIV).

Mario Vargas Llosa has drawn attention to the polemical aspect of *The First Life* on representing interracial and intercultural relationships operating along with the mechanics of domination and power which perpetuate the binary winner / loser or conqueror / conquered, one might add (1993). I suggest that the postcolonial preoccupations that André Brink presents in the introduction concerning racist premises are controversially debated in his fiction as the stereotypical fear of black sexuality is confirmed. It is no coincidence that the novel ends with T'kama being beaten to death for the "audacity to consort with a white woman", caught when he runs towards the ship's feminine figurehead mistaking it for the woman, like Adamastor had Thetis (2000, p. 132). Furthermore, the fear I mentioned is realised in a context where a white woman is raped so that the colonial anxiety of inferior white masculinity can be exposed. The text is therefore also inadequately read if disregarding feminine implications. A feminist-informed reading has into account the pivotal factors of first person narration and male pride which put masculinity at the centre of the text. T'kama's immortality – his innumerable lives – is after all his progeny, life through a *male* child. Women revolve silently around the psychological, emotional and political male axis; a white woman is abused and black women are almost shoved out of the text, hovering almost beyond its margins. Undoubtedly, *The First Life of Adamastor* is *history*, written by nowadays Adamastor so as to denounce the imperial experiences of the past as the root of present evil. But Brink is unable to carry out the same exercise of re-interpretation when it comes to women, a fault he is to redeem himself of in other works, such as *The Other Side of Silence* (2003). So this is as much Brink's story as *The Lusiads* was Camões's. The Xhosa doctor had told T'kama that any problem in the world could be solved with words (2000, p. 62); maybe that could be so but André Brink, as the hero created out of his pen, has difficulty in communicating his intentions to his audience, accentuating at points some of those problems. In that regard, T'kama still mimics his "Father", Adamastor, an

inherently contradictory figure at once, as George Monteiro noted, a symbol of European menace to Africa, of the dangers Africa poses to Europeans in its turn and ultimately of African exploitation (1996, p. 121). Adamastor is bound to remain neurotic, to use Oliveira e Silva's humorous image, his (pre / post) colonial malaises still in need of a good therapist and, no doubt, more critical attention.

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